

Gray's Sporting Journal

The Bird Hunting Edition

VOLUME THIRTY-SIX ISSUE 4 AUGUST 2011



POST OFFICE BOX 10347
JACKSON, WY 83002

www.BLIXTCo.COM

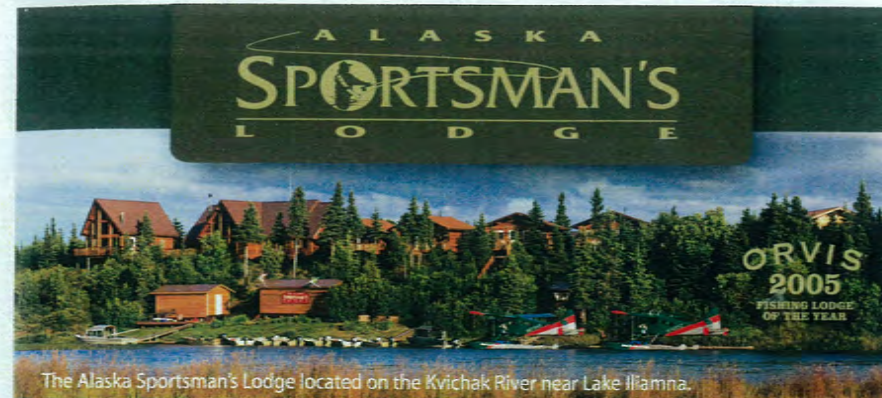
\$7.99 U.S. / CAN



0 8 >



Cold Pegs & Hot Corners
Failure and redemption on a driven shoot in Idaho.
 Article & Photography by Terry Wieland



The Alaska Sportsman's Lodge located on the Kvichak River near Lake Iliamna.



A luxury and inspiring adventure awaits you

Discover the pinnacle of sport fishing in the heart of Alaska's world-renowned Bristol Bay area, with unparalleled remote lodge comfort, a dedicated professional staff, and a commitment to providing spectacular Alaska experiences each day. You will fish gin clear streams teaming with large rainbow Trout and massive salmon runs measured in the millions.



For More information or reservations please visit www.fishasl.com or call us toll free at 888.826.7376

tails of memberships, shoots, and schedules can be found at www.blixto.com. Lars and his wife, Jen, are accomplished Interneters, and on their website you can view a video of driven shooting as well as study every aspect of the operation.

Although their rules aren't rigid, they encourage Guns to dress in the appropriate European fashion for shooting, and also to dress for dinner if they wish. Some did, others didn't; I did, simply because it adds a lovely element to the end of the day, sitting by the fire, looking at the view.

Loaders are, of course, supplied, as are cartridge bags and double-gun slips. Break-action guns are mandatory, and two guns are recommended. Guns can be borrowed if you don't want to bring your own. Ammunition is supplied, and is all H&H with fiber wads to minimize littering. Guns tip their loaders, as well as contributing to a fund for the rest of the staff.

The ranch is two hours' drive from Jackson, Wyoming, but there's a small airport for private aircraft in Driggs, Idaho, about an hour away.



THE FISHING ADVENTURE OF A LIFETIME

Battle the legendary Rivers Inlet Chinook and Coho Salmon on calm protected waters. Legacy Lodge offers all-inclusive salmon fishing adventures for those seeking the ultimate fishing experience. Come enjoy our superior amenities, in-boat instructor program and warm hospitality as you renew your passions for the great outdoors.



Unlimited use of Scout boats with electronics and premium gear



Private rooms in a spectacular setting, exceptional dining and friendly staff



Experience Humpback and Grey whales feeding in our fertile waters

RESERVE YOUR LEGACY EARLY TO ENSURE AVAILABILITY. VISIT OUR WEBSITE AT LEGACYLODGE.COM OR CONTACT US AT 877.FISH.LEGACY (347.4534)

LEGACYLODGE.COM | 877.FISH.LEGACY

to the side. You're allowed to shoot behind or to either side. You also have a front-row position to watch the beat unfold. The sun was warm and the view spectacular as the three lines took up their positions.

I was with head keeper Matt Whindle in the line that would work south. Another line would come toward us, and the third line would be off to the right, ready to drive through the middle when the first two lines halted about a hundred yards apart.

The beaters all carried the signature "snapping" flags, whipping them as they walked with a sporadic *clap, clap*. We could see birds scurrying through the stubble as Matt dressed the line and halted it periodically, signaling orders with his own flag to the other two lines.

Absorbed by the military precision, I reacted instinctively to the first bird that flushed back, and dropped it with a thud. Neil stuffed another shell into my open gun, and we proceeded. Another bird went up, and then another, and as soon as they flushed, they seemed to drop into the stubble. By the time our

line of beaters reached its final position, I had managed to take seven birds out of the eight that flushed within range, and Neil and I scrambled over the bank and down through the brush to the ravine road, where the pegs were laid out and the other Guns were waiting.

Almost immediately, birds began to come in ones and twos. We could see them rise from the stubble through the screen of trees, which gave us a precious few seconds to prepare before the bird burst into clear and legal view.

My confidence back, I swung and shot, swung and shot, exchanged guns with Neil, and generally just put the muzzle in front and pulled the trigger as they crossed overhead. Dogs ran back and forth along the road, diving into the brush after downed birds, and the pheasants and partridge piled up to my left and right.

The birds came at such a rate that I was always seeing one or two rising out of the corner of my eye as I swung, shot, and changed guns, ready to swing on the next. For 10 glorious minutes, birds rose and fell, guns fired, and dogs

dashed. There was no time to look to see if I hit a bird, but I could hear them falling through the branches behind.

When the horn sounded and it was all over, Neil and I were laughing and panting, surrounded by empty hulls and dogs dashing about with birds in their mouths, eager to go after the next one. I fired 41 shots, and Neil estimated there were 30 birds to show for it, including my seven from up top.

The cold pegs and colder performances were but a fading memory. ■

As shooting editor, Wieland feels the management should send him on at least three driven shoots a year, just to keep his hand in. The management promise to get back to him in due course.

If You Go

Blixt & Co.'s shoot in Idaho is run as a membership-driven club in order to meet the requirements of the game department. A member can join for either driven or walked-up shooting, and de-

The day begins with the first of many rituals. The Guns gather around our host, who holds out a clutch of silver straws. One by one, we grasp an end, pluck it forth, and read the number.

It will be a number from 1 to 8 (in my case, 1) and denote the *peg*, or the position you'll take in the shooting line the first drive of the day. It also deals your hand for the rest of the day, since on drive two you will move up two places, and two more on the drive after that.

My loader, Neil Anderson, stood by my shoulder holding a large leather cartridge bag carrying 100 shells and the leather double-gun slip carrying my shotguns: an H. J. Hussey and a Pedro Arrizabalaga. The four of us—Neil, me, and Messrs. Hussey and Arrizabalaga—constituted a unit for the next two days. Our job, for the next 12 drives, was to bring down as many pheasants and red-legged partridge as possible.

The other Guns were consulting their loaders, checking to see who drew pegs on either side, sizing up the situation. It was a cool, cloudy day, with just a bit of breeze: perfect for driven shooting. From the lodge's broad veranda, we could look across a valley to the flat Idaho plateaus, their sides cut by wooded ravines, their flat tops planted in bird-friendly crops.

From up there, it looked like one of those sand-table mockups so beloved of the military, where attacks are mounted and repulsed in miniature, using little rakes to move around the pieces. Far down on the flat, we could see lines of beaters forming up, getting ready for the show.

Then, in a straggly line, we trooped off to the shooting brake—a covered wagon pulled by a truck—and took our places inside for the winding drive

(Top left) Ben Hardy swinging on a hard one. The bird probably dropped. Most of Ben's did. (Top right) The dogs—mostly Labs—are as impeccably skilled and well-trained as the rest of the staff. (Bottom) Guns on the pegs, with their loaders. The pegs are spaced about 30 yards apart.

down the mountainside, across the valley road, and up the ravine to the first line of pegs.

To an old infantryman, the sequence of O Group, equipment check, forming up, and moving to the start line were oh so familiar. As was the squadron of butterflies performing aerobatics in the innards.

The first day of a driven shoot is unforgettable.

In *The Big Shots*, his account of driven shooting in England, Jonathan Ruffer wrote that a well-run large-scale shoot "combined the opportunities of a Vimy Ridge machine-gunner with an infinitely better lunch."

A good driven shoot most closely compares with a military operation in its organization, and if there is any one reason for the high cost of driven shoots these days, organization is it.

In Europe, where driven shooting is a fine art, prices range from \$5,000 to \$10,000 a day. *A day!* Four days of driven grouse in England cost as much as a two-week safari in Africa. And it doesn't take long at a driven shoot to see why. First, you need the land, properly laid out with the necessary lines of trees. You need birds raised and released by the thousands, and crops planted to feed them. The birds also need cover from predators. And this is just the start.

Lars Magnusson, my host in Idaho, worked as shooting director for Griffin & Howe for many years, and during that time he dreamed of establishing a proper commercial driven shoot in the United States. In 2006, he joined the Lazy Triple Creek Ranch in Idaho, and in 2008 formed Blixt & Co. and took over the lease.

Magnusson began by hiring an English gamekeeper, the first in a progression of six keepers who have man-

aged the shooting at Blixt & Co. under Magnusson's direction. The most recent is Matt Whindle, who returned home to the U.K. at the end of the 2010 season. For the first time, the head keeper is an American, Devlin Anderson, who understudied all his predecessors, a long apprenticeship in how the thing is properly done.

Why so many different keepers? "In a situation like this, I wanted to get different perspectives and opinions," Magnusson said. In other words, they were management consultants, brought in to train local people and then leave.

Today, Blixt & Co. has a complete operation, with a country house to lodge 10 in luxury. Dev has a staff of under-keepers to manage the birds and the land, a contingent of local people trained as loaders (no small skill, by the way), and a larger contingent trained as beaters. There are dozens of beautifully trained dogs, and their handlers, to act as pickers-up. There is a game wagon with a driver, and the shooting brake with its driver, and a staff to set up that minor repast called elevenses, when folks pause after the second drive for the traditional hot soup in a covered pavilion.

Altogether, somewhere around 60 people gather on any given day to cater to the needs of 8 to 10 guns, with more in the background. Under the circumstances, Blixt & Co.'s rate of \$4,000 a day looks quite reasonable.

To my knowledge, Magnusson's Idaho operation is the only true commercial driven shooting in the U.S. There are a couple of private driven shoots, and some tower shoots that masquerade as driven. But releasing birds from a central spot surrounded by guns, while fun and challenging, isn't driven shooting any more than cowboy-action shooting is the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral.

The shooting brake trundled slowly down the hill and onto a road leading up a ravine. There were two plateaus, with three parallel ravines—one on each side and one through the middle. A couple of dozen different lines of pegs lined the ravines, some facing east and some west.

All this and more is located just an hour southwest of New Orleans on the Gulf of Mexico and the intracoastal waterway. In **Cocodrie, Dulac** and **Point Aux Chenes** you'll find over 40+ charter fishing services, marinas, launches, great accommodations, delicious dining venues and fishing camp rentals. Come experience the very best in world-class fishing here in the Heart of Louisiana's Wetlands...

DEEP SEA COASTAL INLAND SWAMP FRESHWATER & FLY FISHING HOUMA LOUISIANA



For more information call us at 800.688.2732 or visit houmatravel.com

We drove to the very head of the ravine, where one line of beaters was formed up above, waiting for us.

The plan was this: Three lines of beaters formed a broad open square; the Guns constitute the fourth side. The beaters, facing each other, would converge to within about a hundred yards, at which point the third line would push through between, driving the birds to the edge of the plateau where they would take flight over the Guns below.

Our initial purpose was to line up on the road, with the Guns about 15 to 20 yards apart, and move down in line with the beaters. Being the number 1 peg, I was aligned with the line of beaters themselves. My purpose was to bag (or attempt to bag) any birds that took flight early and tried to bail out over the edge.

In this way, we'd managed to down the first few birds, and also get a feel for what it would be like. And what would it be like? Not easy.

The game wagon is a familiar sight in Europe but not common here. This vehicle, like the shooting brake, was custom-built for Blixt & Co.

This month's shooting column addresses the techniques and difficulties of training for and shooting driven birds, so I won't go into that here. However, driven shooting comes in many forms with many different problems, dictated by the birds being driven. A pheasant is as different from a red grouse as a mourning dove from a flushed quail.

Blixt & Co. offers pheasants and red-legged partridge, and there are both hen and rooster pheasants. The pheasants are bigger, faster fliers, and fly singly; the partridge are slower, smaller, and tend to flush in bunches. A hen pheasant physically resembles a partridge, and the size and speed difference forces you to adjust constantly.

As well, Magnusson's rule is, under no circumstances may a bird be shot at unless the Gun can see sky all around it. So if you're down below, and the bird flushes up above but swoops down with the hill behind it, you mustn't shoot because beaters may be on the hill or just over the brow. Similarly, you can't shoot at the bird behind you, because that hillside will have dogs and dog handlers on it.

So there you are, down in this V, with steep hillsides in front and behind,

able to shoot only at birds that are overhead—by which time the birds will be at top speed, your window very small, and open only for a moment. Add that pheasants fly high and strong while partridge tend to swerve and dive, and you have a recipe for a first-class m el e.

The Guns were a mixed group.

In Europe, a group for a shooting party is put together with care, matching personalities as much as possible, weeding out dangerous or inept Guns, hoping to include at least a couple of top shots to keep the numbers up—important when sales to game dealers constitute a significant source of revenue.

Blixt & Co., of course, doesn't have that concern; at the same time, as a commercial operation they don't have a lot of discretion in accepting reservations. The price helps, since it precludes the non-serious. Still, safety is a concern, particularly so with driven shooting, because the etiquette and practices are unique unto themselves.

Our group included two Guns who shoot driven game regularly and a couple who had never shot it before; the rest of us



had some experience both with shooting driven game and working with a loader.

Everyone had the pleasure (or pain) of occupying a hot corner once or twice, and the pain (or relief) of occupying one or two cold pegs. A hot corner can be painful when you aren't hitting much, and everyone is watching your flocks fly on, unscathed; a cold peg can be a relief when you're not shooting well.

Although driven birds are controlled as much as possible, they're still birds, with minds of their own. They will flush

wild, cut back over the beaters, fly high and forward, and bail out over the edge early. One pheasant rooster took the interesting tack of running down a hillside and then flying, shoulder high, the length of the line, causing Guns and loaders alike to dive for cover while our dogs barked and looked on in disbelief.

In Europe, it's customary to keep a close tally of both birds and shotshells, for economic reasons, and to issue a game card to every participant at the end of the shoot. Per our cards on day one,

we collectively downed 307 birds while expending 1,510 shotshells. On day two, sharper and more practiced, we collected 301 birds using only 1,189 shotshells.

Lord Walsingham, one of the greatest of the Edwardian English "big shots," reckoned that a 40 percent ratio of birds to shells, over the course of a season, was a decent average for a good shot. On day one, our average was 20 percent; on day two, it rose to 25 percent.


Speaking for myself, this improvement didn't come in a slow, steady progression. During the course of our 12 drives, I was up, down, all over the place. The highlight of day one was taking a double from an incoming clutch of pheasants. I remember doing that—and I'm clinging to that memory, thank you very much.

The less said about my morning on day two, the better. On the fourth drive, right before lunch, I occupied the literal corner on a drive along a hilltop, where the birds that didn't bail out over the edge found themselves with the choice of flying or going back. Up on the brow of a gradual slope, we could see the birds take off and then swoop down on us, to the left, right, and head-on, but always with the hill as a background—forbidden fruit until the last second when they swooped over at high speed. It was purely poke and shoot—a technique abhorred by all shooting instructors—and when it was over, my loader and I had three birds down. Or was it four? I forget. Mercifully.


A lovely lunch on the veranda in the sunshine, looking out toward the Tetons, was lost on me as I morosely munched my way through the prime rib, reflecting that I knew nothing about shotguns or shooting and would likely never hit another bird as long as I lived.

I was on stand 7 for the first drive after lunch, and drew the coldest of cold pegs. Only two birds came near me, and I missed them both. Awash in self-loathing, and with my confidence in shreds, I trudged up onto the plateau to join the beaters as the "backing" Gun in honor of my number 1 position for the last drive of the shoot.

The Gun who goes with the beaters has the job of taking any birds that flush and curl back over the line, or fly out




FLYING BRANCH



ORVIS
ENDORSED
WINGSHOOTING
LODGE


Setting the Standard Since 1985



ORVIS
ENDORSED
FLY FISHING
LODGE

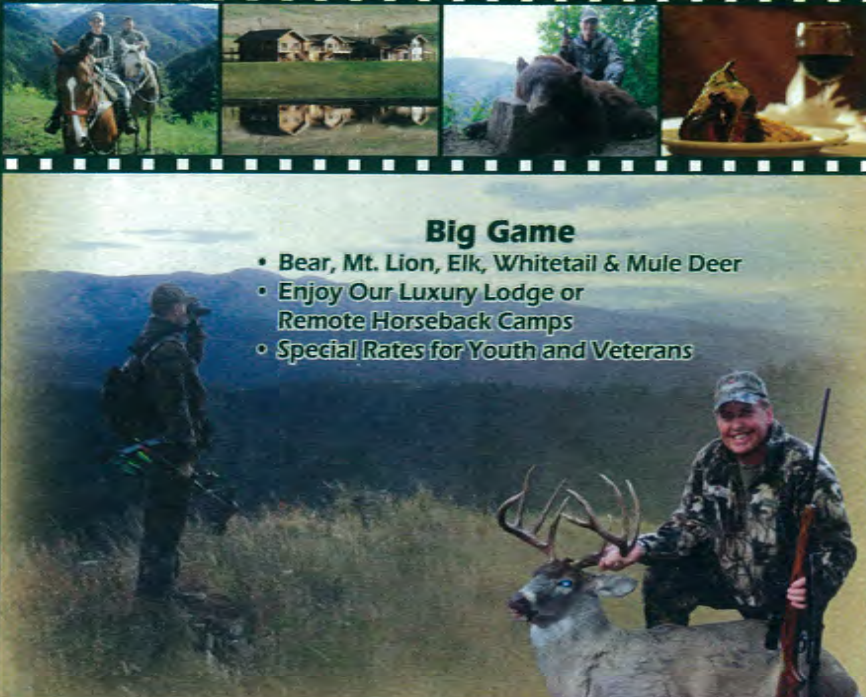
Wingshooting & Fishing

- Proven Hunting Dogs
- Luxury Accommodations
- Corporate & Group Rates
- World Renowned Fishing



Big Game

- Bear, Mt. Lion, Elk, Whitetail & Mule Deer
- Enjoy Our Luxury Lodge or Remote Horseback Camps
- Special Rates for Youth and Veterans



800-472-1945 • Idaho • info@flyingbranch.com • www.flyingbranch.com